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ABSTRACT

A work-study student assistant was employed at the Carnegie Mellon University Engineering and Science Library to help prepare documentation for a new library program. The student, a junior professional writing major, used the Apple Macintosh microcomputer to design a brochure, billing worksheet, and spreadsheet for the new program. On completion of the original project, the student assistant continued at the library 15 hours a week until her graduation. Her work included developing a circulation system training manual, designing screen panels for the online information system, and producing in-house publications using desktop publishing software. An unanticipated bonus for the student was the creation of a portfolio, to be used on job interviews with potential employers. (MES)

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A NEW TWIST ON AN OLD THEME

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It all began with a need to prepare documentation for a new service in the library. There was little time and less money to produce fancy brochures, special letterhead, and necessary forms. The library had a personal computer and software, but no expertise beyond the basics. We hired a student assistant who had just completed her sophomore year as a Professional Writing major. When the project was completed, we recognized the student's potential. We could use our limited time to edit her work instead of writing original documents. Over two years, we assigned her manual compilations, spreadsheets, and desktop publishing!

Our problem was a shortage of time and a lack of software expertise to produce materials for our new library service. Our solution combined a standard academic library solution with a high-tech one for a new twist on an old theme: we used a student assistant *and* a personal computer to pull the project together in record time. This summer work study opportunity became an ongoing student assistant position in Engineering & Science Library. Eventually, everyone on staff became dependent on this student technical writer.

THE PROBLEM:

I had been assigned to get a fee-based service for area corporations underway within six weeks, *without* clerical assistance. There was no budget for an assistant. The library owned a Macintosh and the routine software: MacWrite, MacDraw, and MacPaint,[1] but I was recently hired and unfamiliar with the Macintosh. I knew I could learn, but the time limitation worried me. I decided to take advantage of the existence of the Professional and Technical Writing programs at Carnegie Mellon by hiring a student who was both a talented writer and familiar with the software and hardware available to me for the project.

Deirdre was such a student. She had just completed her sophomore year as a Professional Writing major. She was also familiar with library work, having spent a year working as a student assistant in Mellon Institute Library. At the interview, I made sure that she could operate a Macintosh, the personal computer of choice in the Carnegie Mellon University Libraries. Deirdre assured me that she could use a "Mac," and was familiar with MacWrite, MacDraw, and MacPaint. (Figure 1 is the job description I posted on campus.)

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SUMMER WORK STUDY

Job Title: Technical Writer

Job Description: To develop contract documents, descriptive materials, recordkeeping documents, forms, and invoices for a new program being instituted by the Carnegie Mellon University Libraries. Publications will be used in a business setting with clients outside the University. Works closely with the PLAID Program Director. In addition, will work with the library staff to write a procedure manual for the new circulation system which will be operational in the fall.

Experience and qualifications: Junior or senior in Technical Writing program. Related experience preferred. Eligible for work-study. Pennsylvania resident.

Starting date: May 12, 1986

Salary: $3.35/hour

FIGURE 1

THE SOLUTION:

The Libraries had hosted a reception on May 13th for local special librarians announcing our new fee-based service, PLAID (Professional Library Access & Information Delivery). The start date was scheduled for July 1st, and no prepared documentation existed. The day she began working for me, I told Deirdre that she had *two weeks* to put together a brochure layout for campus printing. I outlined the several key points which I wanted the brochure to include, and she went away to work on her own. When she presented me with three different designs by the end of her first workday, all of which contained the required key points and all of which were attractive enough in design to be worthy of consideration, I began to relax.

Producing the other descriptive materials was easy enough. I talked, and Deirdre took notes. She wrote, and I edited. Even though I had had secretarial assistance in past jobs, the responsibility for original copy had always rested with me. Never before had I experienced the luxury of

delegating all the work and only being responsible for editing and approving the final product. I was heady with newfound joy. What had threatened to be an impossible task was now going to be fun. We designed acknowledgement letters and package descriptions for the various program options PLAID offered. We began planning invoice preparation, and Deirdre designed a billing worksheet which we still use (two years later) to prepare invoices and a spreadsheet to produce monthly reports for the Libraries Administration. (Figure 2 shows the current version of the billing worksheet.)

July 1st rolled along, and the PLAID Program came into existence. Now what would Deirdre do? I had discovered software called Microsoft Word[2] which could merge letters with a list of potential members' addresses. Deirdre was given a mailing project. She compiled a list of local engineering, chemical, and computer firms which could benefit from membership in the PLAID Program. She designed letterhead by "SuperPainting"[3] a Carnegie Mellon logo (see Figure 3) and placing it opposite our address at the top of our correspondence. We used this "letterhead" to create cover letters for our new brochure, and continue to use it for all PLAID correspondence.

WAS THIS A GOOD IDEA?

Deirdre and I worked together in this way throughout the summer. We met early each morning to go over her completed work. I edited the materials which she presented for inspection. Our work relationship was good. She was hard-working, and I was thrilled to have such reliable help. Why did I need all this help? What was *I* doing all this time while she was busy writing? I was staffing the reference desk 18 hours/week, making collection development decisions, and supervising our interlibrary loan operations, including training the ILL Assistant to assist with the new PLAID members. Sounds pretty normal for a reference librarian, doesn't it? That's why initially I had been so concerned about completing the program documentation by my deadline. There was always enough day-to-day library work to do so that I despaired of finding time to study the Macintosh software packages or experiment creatively.

OTHERS DISCOVER MY GOLDMINE!

In the meantime, the circulation system for the online catalog was scheduled to come up mid-August. Deirdre was drafted by my supervisor to help write a circulation system training manual for the support staff. It was a successful project, and it gave my boss a good idea. Why not have all of the support staff, with Deirdre's assistance, compile procedure manuals for their job duties? Staff members gave Deirdre their scribbled notes to turn into procedures. When an explanation was unclear, Deirdre interviewed the staff member and watched her perform the task, then wrote her own description of the procedure to be edited for content by the staff member.

BILLING WORKSHEET

1. PLAID ACCOUNT NUMBER_____

2. PHOTOCOPIES_____ @ $____/each= $_____

3. EXTRA PAGES_____ @ $ .50/each= $_____

4. TELEFACSIMILE CHARGES_____add'l $ 8.00/each= $_____

5. TOTAL $_____

6. LOANS_____

7. NO CHARGE_____

CROSS CHECK:

8. PHOTOCOPIES 15pps. OR LESS_____ @ $____/each= $_____

9. TOTAL PRICE OF COPIES OVER 15pps. = $_____

10. TELEFACIMILE CHARGES_____@ $ 8.00/each= $_____

11. TOTAL$_____
SHOULD MATCH LINE 5 ABOVE

12. INVOICE NUMBER_____

FIGURE 2

The manuals were essentially straightforward word processing for which we didn't need any exceptional computer expertise, but there were other

impediments. No one could ever find the time to create procedure manuals, not to mention the variance in writing style and ability which exists among the staff. Without talented student assistance dedicated to such a project, it probably would never have been completed. Deirdre felt free to exercise creativity in her assignments. For example, our library runs a courier service to several other science libraries which are located off-campus. Rather than describe the courier's route in language, she drew the map seen in Figure 4. Now when the student who usually performs this task is sick, *anyone* can fill in and follow the route.

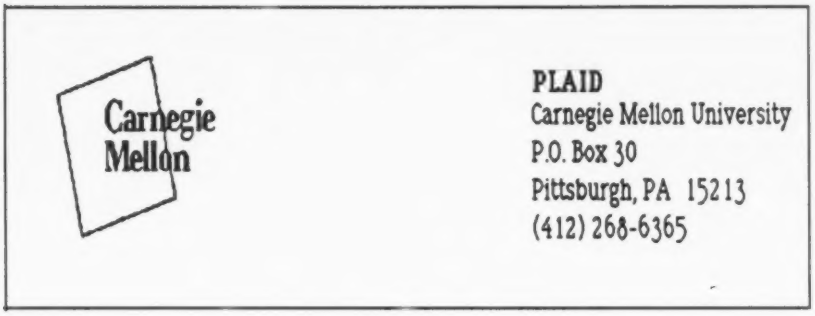

FIGURE 3

SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

We were never at a loss for things to assign Deirdre. In fact, there were so many things we wanted her to do, I suggested she develop a work-form on which staff could describe their projects and she could keep track of her assignments and the time each took. When everyone wanted something at the same time, I set priorities for Deirdre. Over the two schoolyears which followed her summer work study experience, Deirdre worked for us 15 hours/week and completed over 160 projects ranging from the mundane (routing slips, signs, and correspondence) to the extraordinary (designing screen panels for our online information system, creating forms, and writing original copy for the professional staff).

Probably the most exciting accomplishment was the desktop publishing our technical writing student perfected for us. In the Spring of 1986, our library director decided that we should begin publishing a newsletter for the science faculty and graduate students who are our patrons. The assignment to learn about in-house publishing was given to Kate, a library school intern, who, after reading about PageMaker,[4] recommended the software to the head of the library. Shortly after Kate learned all about PageMaker and produced our first issue, her internship ended, and we owned software with which no one on staff was familiar. Deirdre to the rescue.

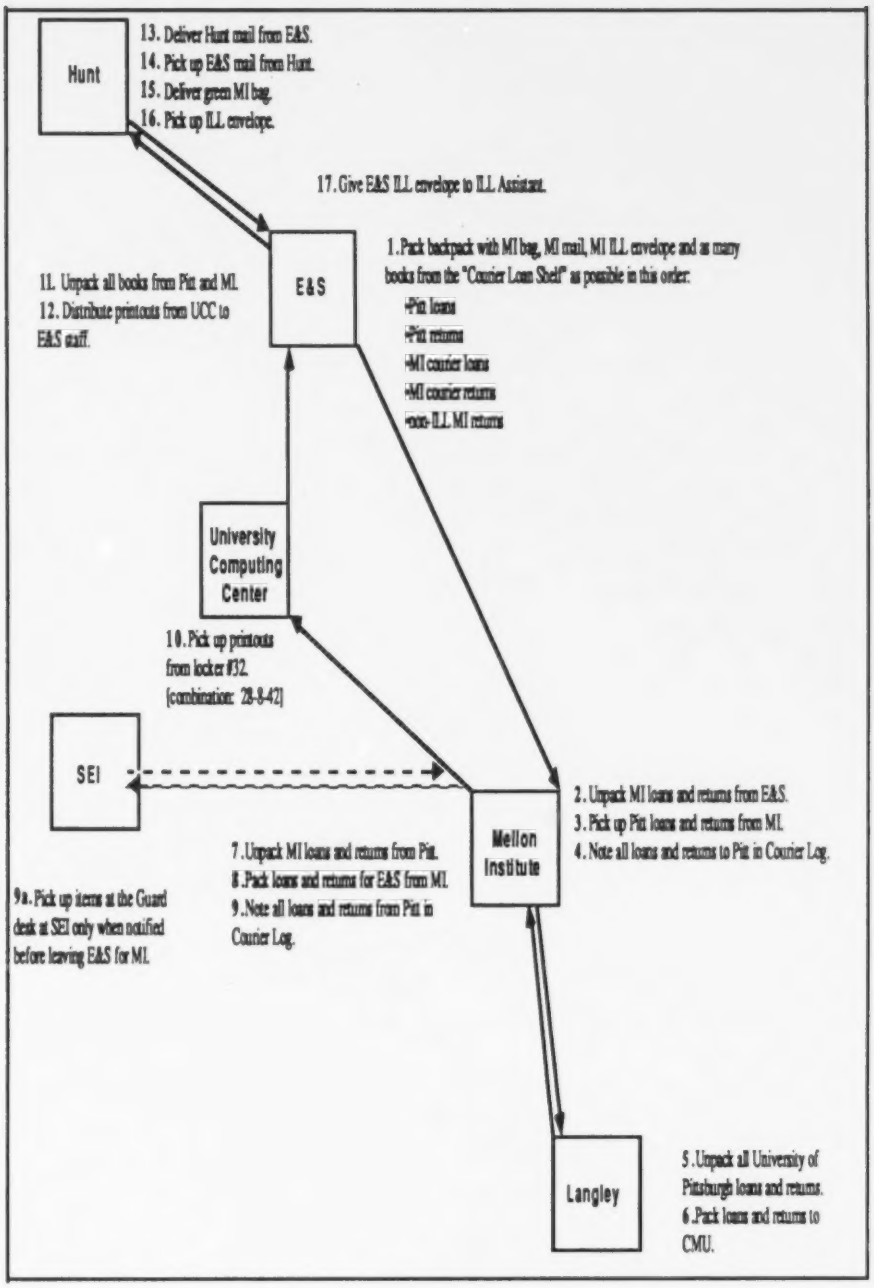
Hunt
13. Deliver Hunt mail from E&S.
14. Pick up E&S mail from Hunt.
15. Deliver green MI bag.
16. Pick up ILL envelope.
17. Give E&S ILL envelope to ILL Assistant.
E&S
1. Pack backpack with MI bag, MI mail, MI ILL envelope and as many books from the "Courier Loan Shelf" as possible in this order:
•Pitt loans
•Pitt returns
•MI courier loans
•MI courier returns
•non-ILL MI returns
11. Unpack all books from Pitt and MI.
12. Distribute printouts from UCC to E&S staff.
University Computing Center
10. Pick up printouts from locker #32. (combination: 28-8-42)
SEI
9a. Pick up items at the Guard desk at SEI only when notified before leaving E&S for MI.
Mellon Institute
2. Unpack MI loans and returns from E&S.
3. Pick up Pitt loans and returns from MI.
4. Note all loans and returns to Pitt in Courier Log.
7. Unpack MI loans and returns from Pitt.
8. Pack loans and returns for E&S from MI.
9. Note all loans and returns from Pitt in Courier Log.
Langley
5. Unpack all University of Pittsburgh loans and returns.
6. Pack loans and returns to CMU.

FIGURE 4

To produce an issue, authors submitted "MacWritten" articles which Deirdre edited. These articles were then placed on the template developed for the Sci-Tech Informer. By the middle of the 1987-88 schoolyear, Deirdre had become so advanced that she could place pictures, as well as text, in our issues. To make distribution run smoothly, she created mailing labels for the different departments which identified the number of copies and their delivery point.

Luckily for us, Deirdre's work with the PLAID statistics had required her to learn MultiPlan.[5] When the library flooded on Labor Day, Deirdre created an alphabetical list of the damaged materials. She indicated, for each title, which issues and volumes were lost, which nearby libraries owned the same issues, and replacement costs. Sorting by different data points enabled us to produce a reference list of what was damaged and where to find another copy and to provide our insurance company with an accounting of our losses and expected replacement costs. This was a task someone else could have done, but at the expense of what other essential library service?

SUMMARY

Our experience was the successful merger of student assistant responsibility and technology. Long ago, librarians learned the value of hard-working, creative student assistants, and recently, the personal computer has become an indispensable tool in academic libraries. For us, putting a student assistant *in control* on a personal computer was a successful new twist. We didn't research the idea. We just let the idea take shape, and when it proved to be a good one, we let our imaginations determine the course.

Even if your institution doesn't have a Professional or Technical Writing Program, likely, there are English majors on campus who are good writers. We discovered that the writing aspect is the most important factor in the use of the student assistant coupled with the personal computer. The time saving feature of this idea is realized when the student takes your rough ideas and produces copy which you can edit or sometimes even use as is! Our experience was so successful that we intend to replace Deirdre this fall with another Professional Writing major.

The unexpected bonus was the creation of a portfolio for our student. Deirdre kept copies of everything she created, edited, or improved for us. She took it with her on job interviews with potential employers. I'm happy to report that Deirdre is now a technical writer for IBM Corporation!

NOTES

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